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October 3, 2011

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## Historic Conference Assembles Afghan Civil Society Leaders To Begin Government Policy Reform Effort

**KABUL, AFGHANISTAN** – Two hundred of Afghanistan's civil society leaders and government officials converged for a historic meeting last week to begin working together on ways to reform national policies so they are more responsive to community needs.

The two-day National Policy Reform Conference, organized by the nonprofit Counterpart International and funded by the U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID), explored how Afghanistan's government and civil society organizations can partner effectively to represent and advocate for community interests, influence policy and legislation and promote improved civic education and accountability. This national gathering was an important step in helping Afghanistan's civil society organizations become more effective as advocates for citizens and as a link between citizens and government.

"When civil society comes together around one issue or a group of issues, we start to see a vibrant civil society and a vibrant democracy," said USAID Mission Director Dr. S. Ken Yamashita. He noted civil society's deep roots in Afghanistan – where village elders and community members have a history of gathering together to solve problems – and said that Afghan citizens are well prepared for the types of dialogues that must take place in order for the country to advance.

The Afghan government reminded attendees that civil society must be active in policy discussions. In particular, Director of Budget Policy and Reform with the Ministry of Finance Zia-Ur-Rachman Heleemi explained how national spending priorities are set and stressed that there are many opportunities for civil society organizations to work with the government to help establish the right priorities and that they are looking for civil society partners to help them do just that.

During this past year, USAID and its Afghan partners have organized more than 213 community and regional dialogues in nine provinces that brought together non-governmental organizations, religious leaders, provincial government officials, and citizens to discuss their concerns and ideas for how to improve life for many Afghan citizens. In all, more than 4,150 men and women participated in these dialogues.

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